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Teaching sensory geographies in practice: transforming students' awareness and understanding through playful experimentation

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Abstract

Various ‘turns’ within human geography (‘emotional’, ‘sensory’, ‘experimental’, and ‘creative’) have highlighted the role that the senses play in our embodied and emotional experiences of place, and the need for more sensuous scholarly practices. Resulting work has enriched the discipline theoretically and methodologically, however, the same cannot be said for our pedagogy. Drawing on data relating to one undergraduate Honours option course, this paper highlights the powerful role that sensorially engaged pedagogy can play in transforming the awareness and understanding of geography students. It focuses, in particular, on methods of emphasising the embodied, emplaced and individually constructed nature of knowledge, the critical potential of play in the learning process, and how students might be emboldened to enact performances of understanding leading to a transformation in the person of the student.

Keywords

Experiential learning, geography, undergraduate, sensory, play, knowledge

Introduction

In the last twenty years work resulting from a number of ‘turns’ within human geography (‘emotional’, ‘sensory’, ‘experimental’, and ‘creative’) (Bondi, Davidson & Smith, 2005; Vannini, Waskul, & Gottschalk, 2012; Last, 2012; Hawkins, 2015) has highlighted the role that the senses play in our embodied and emotional experiences of place (Paterson, 2009), and the need for geographers to adopt more sensuous scholarly practices (Vannini et al, 2012). Such work has enriched the discipline theoretically by extending previous work which sought to re-humanise and ‘em-body’ geography, broadening the scope of what we acknowledge to be legitimate areas of enquiry, and answering calls for researchers to become more ‘touchy-feely’ in their approach (Crang, 2003). Methodological innovation is also rife (Buckingham &

Degen, 2015), however, a lack of consistency across our professional practice has meant that we have not focused to the same degree on our pedagogy (Whalley, Saunders, Lewis, Buenemann & Sutton, 2011). This, despite recent writing on experimentation sparking “renewed thinking about the role of pedagogy in geographical praxis” (Kullman, 2013: 890).

That is not to say that there has been no innovation in teaching and assessment during this period; rather, to point out that if we are to educate our students about the experiential nature of knowing (Whalley et al, 2011) and develop their sensory intelligence¹ (Vannini et al, 2012) then perhaps we need to move away from traditionally-formatted lectures and exams as the dominant forms of teaching and assessment in geography undergraduate curricula (Whalley et al, 2011). Whilst they can be useful for establishing context, synthesizing the literature, and clarifying complex concepts (Scheyvens, Griffin, Jocoy, Liu & Bradford, 2008; Lom, 2012), lectures have attracted sustained criticism in recent times (Krakowka, 2012; Anderson, 2013). This includes their failure to take into consideration the significant role of the body in cognition (Nguyen & Larson, 2015; Stolz, 2015), their support of hegemonic modes of sense perception (Lambert, 2011), and their adverse impact on the ‘production of knowledge’ (Lambert, 2012). For example, it is easy for students to remain detached from standard lecture content (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Brown Wright, 2011) and employ a disengaged approach to assessment by adhering ‘superficially’ to academic protocols (Anderson, 2013); the result being generic answers which omit as much as they include and a ‘silencing’ of “more positioned, emotionally informed accounts” (ibid., p.386).

In 2005 Liz Bondi observed that geographers were anxious about admitting the human emotions and feelings that drove their research (cited in Phillips, 2010). Whilst this anxiety had “not entirely crushed geographical curiosity”, she argued, emotions and feelings such as

curiosity were “often deliberately excluded from, or habitually suppressed within, geographical discourses” (ibid, p.449). In the same year, anthropologist David Howes (2005: 6) noted likewise, that the “cultural and historical study of the senses [remained] suspect in the eyes of many scholars [for] fear that an emphasis on sensation entails a loss of critical awareness and precipitates a slide into a morass of emotion and desire”. Much work has been done since then to further expose and challenge the mind-body dualism which has undoubtedly precipitated this inverse correlation between sensory awareness and intellectual activity in the West (Howes, 2005), and to disrupt the notion of geography as an emotion-free (as in entirely rational) enterprise (Little, 2019). Yet, although emotional engagement is now understood to be a critical force in learning, indeed, without some degree of emotional engagement students are unlikely to learn anything at all (Scoffham, 2013; Beard, Humberstone & Clayton, 2014), perhaps we could be doing more to enhance the sensory, emotional and embodied depth of our geographical pedagogy.

This paper outlines how I have responded to this challenge in my undergraduate Honours option course Space, Place and Sensory Perception (hereafter SPSP). First run in 2015, this innovative course has four key aims: to introduce the students to the broad range of scholarship on the senses currently circulating within geography and related disciplines; to illustrate the ways in which our understandings of distinct sensory perceptions are historically, culturally and geographically situated; to consider the methodological implications of geographers’ theorization of the senses and the challenge that new and emerging approaches present to older paradigms; and, to encourage the students to reflect upon their own sensory engagements and make connections between knowledge gained in class and the wider world. In order to connect the curriculum content to the curriculum delivery the course is as sensorially engaging as possible in its pedagogy. To this end, real

world examples are used whenever possible (Anderson, 2013), the students' personal experiences are foregrounded (Manolis, Burns, Assudani & Chinta, 2013), every attempt is used to cultivate their curiosity (Phillips, 2010), and they are encouraged to explore and question the world around them in playful, experimental, and adventurous ways (Woodyer, 2012; Phillips, 2015).

The paper is structured as follows. First, I situate SPSP within the discourse on experiential learning, the principle tenets of which have both informed² and helped me reflect upon my pedagogical practice. **Experiential learning is often characterised in terms of its complexity, authenticity and practice-based nature, but here I focus on embodiment and the emotions, facets which are often neglected despite a concern for the 'whole person'.** Marvell and Simm (2018: 518) note, for example, the stigma "around the recognition of emotion in geography fieldwork and its role in the production of knowledge". **In so doing, I contribute to recent work highlighting the pivotal role of emotion in the learning process (Zeivots, 2016, Bartels & Wagenaar, 2018) and the potential rewards of an embodied pedagogy (Nguyen & Larson, 2015).** Second, I outline the provenance of the data and illustrative material used as evidence throughout the paper. The main body of the discussion is then split into two parts. The first outlines my approach to teaching and learning wherein knowledge and understanding are 'embodied', 'emplaced', and constructed and shaped by the individual (Glass, 2014; Anderson, 2013). The second explores the course assessment practices, focusing in particular, on the blog assessment and the positive impact of writing personally informed accounts. **Whilst acknowledging that the content of SPSP lends itself well, and perhaps in more immediately obvious ways than the content of other courses might, to a sensorially-engaged pedagogical approach.** In conclusion, I highlight three key ways in which a more multi-sensory, playful and experimental approach

can contribute to a transformation in **geography students'** awareness and understanding **regardless of the course focus.**

Experiential learning

Experiential learning has a long history. In his pivotal book *Experience and Education* (1938) John Dewey proposed that experience should be a central component of the educational process stressing the active roles of sensory experience and action in knowledge construction (Nguyen & Larson 2015). Contemporary scholars have assigned various terms to the 'nexus' Dewey described, referring to it as somatic, bodily, spatial, or integrative learning (Nguyen & Larson, 2015) and his work has been developed in various ways and disciplinary contexts (c.f. Kolb, 1984). It is possible, however, to identify several key characteristics of an experiential learning approach. These include: an appreciation of the fact that knowledge is not built exclusively by the mind, but also with and in the body (Nguyen & Larson, 2015); an emphasis on 'learning by doing' (Young, 2002); a willingness to place knowledge value on everyday experience (Krakowka, 2012); and, a student-centred classroom dynamic (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

Experiential learning is embodied in that it "involves coming to know ourselves and the world around us better as a 'lived body' subject that senses and does the sensing in a meaningful way" (Stolz, 2015, p.483). The senses aid pedagogy by exciting the curiosity in ways not apparent with abstract learning (Thornbush, 2014). Providing 'hands on' opportunities makes the learning experience more personally meaningful (Krakowka, 2012), it encourages students to become active participants in the learning process which fosters deeper levels of learning (Brown Wright, 2011; Fuller, 2012), and it prompts students to make connections between their everyday lives and academic theory increasing the relevance of what they learn (Gross &

Rutland, 2017). Experiential learning is also embodied in the sense that it facilitates a redistribution of roles and competencies in the classroom (Lambert, 2011). Students are given more control over, and are responsible for, their own learning (Biggs and Tang, 2011); they are also encouraged to take their own and their peers' knowledges more seriously (Cook, 2000). In turn, the lecturer must relinquish some of their authority and "transition from a traditional detachment from, to a more personal involvement in, their students' experiences" (ibid, p.15). Their role is transformed from 'transmitter of knowledge' to 'facilitator of learning' (Brown Wright, 2011) and depends more on the positive regard or "belief they hold – and express – in the intellectual capacity of their students" than their capacity for explication (Lambert, 2012, p.214). The result is a humanising of the relationship between student and lecturer which can prove transformative for both (Blackie, Case & Jawitz, 2010).

In this scenario, success is not measured by how much of the syllabus is covered, but by how much the students actually learn and the depth of their understanding (ibid). The teaching and learning are 'transformational' in the sense that the course becomes a shared opportunity for learning and growth rather than a series of uni-directional knowledge 'transactions', the students are motivated by a desire to learn rather than to get 'good grades', and to be successful means to have undergone a process of self-reflection which prompts a change in attitude and/or provides an enriched world-view, not simply the completion of required tasks (Gross & Rutland, 2017; Tovar & Misischia, 2018). In other words, there is "a fundamental growth in the person of the student" (Blackie et al, 2010: 639). Facilitating this success requires the design and maintenance of a learning environment which fosters positive emotions (Tovar & Misischia, 2018). This a quality often overlooked or ignored in Higher Education (Beard et al, 2014), however, as Blackie et al (2010: 641) note, "the manner in which an individual interacts with knowledge is emotionally charged". **Emotions influence**

both “how deeply and critically people engage with ideas and experiences, and the goals and motivations that inhibit or enable behaviours” (Hill, Healey, West & Déry, 2019: 2). That is not to say that negative emotions are unimportant or detrimental; they too can provide motivation and enhance learning (ibid.). But, for students to feel comfortable sharing their feelings, to critically examine their personal beliefs, to evaluate the alternative views and perspectives of their peers, to take risks and maybe make mistakes, all involved must work together to create an environment of compassion, trust, and empathy (Tovar & Misischia, 2018).

Experiential learning is an approach which can engender within students an increased enthusiasm for the subject, stimulate learning, and increase self-confidence (Brecher, 2007); however, it is not always educative (Young, 2002; Scheyvens et al, 2008). There is no guarantee that students will understand class content even when the lecturer feels that an activity makes the most basic of connections between self and theory (Brecher, 2007). As Nguyen and Larson (2015, p.338) note, physical awareness may be “a prerequisite for embodiment, but by itself it does not constitute embodied learning consciousness”. Focusing only on the ‘hands-on’ activities risks neglecting “the ‘minds-on’ phases of deliberate reflection and conceptualization that link curriculum concepts to these experiences” (Young, 2002, p.43). For the constructive development of knowledge, or what Biggs and Tang (2007) have called ‘deep learning’, to occur a course’s “‘minds-on’ processes must be as rigorously planned” as the opportunities for active participation (Young, 2002, p.43). Reflection is an important component of the experiential learning process (Ferguson, Makarem & Jones, 2016). Reflection helps students to interrogate, make sense of and derive meaning from their experiences and any emotions they might have felt (Ryan, 2012; Coulson & Harvey, 2013). It encourages them to scrutinize their own values, ethics and practices and, used in combination

with other evidence or explanation from the literature or relevant theory (Ryan, 2012), it can also help students understand how bodies (their own included) encode and enact social norms (Nguyen & Larson, 2015). Such critical self-evaluation, however, is challenging even for the experienced academic (Glass, 2014) and in recent years there has been much debate as to how best support students become more thoughtful observers of their world and more able to understand how their positionality and/or practices might influence the construction of knowledge (ibid).

Methodology

The data used in this paper are drawn from the Course Evaluation Survey (CES) responses for the academic years 2014-15, 2015-16, 2016-17, 2017-18 and 2018-19 (n=62). Whilst self-report questionnaires have inevitable limitations (e.g. response bias, memory errors) (MacNeill, Driscoll & Hunt, 2015; Salmela-Aro, Moeller, Schneider & Spicer, 2016), **the CES data provided an opportunity to access anonymised positive *and* negative evaluations of the course (see discussion on potential data skewing below).** The CES data were supplemented by the findings of a focus group with students taking the course in the 2016-17 academic year which formed part of a University of Edinburgh Principal's Teaching Award Scheme funded study, for which I was Principal Investigator, looking at the use of assessed blogs across the University of Edinburgh. The students who participated in the study were recruited by a postgraduate research assistant (PGRA), previously unknown to them, who presented an overview of the research in class. Student volunteers were asked to contact the PGRA directly (via email) and the PGRA also conducted the focus group; at no point was I involved, as Course Organiser (CO) or project investigator, in the recruitment for, and implementation of, the focus group. Five students participated out of a possible 30. The focus group questions focused primarily on the students' experiences of blogging, what had (not)

worked well, the extent to which blogging allowed them to develop their own voice, and the advantages and disadvantages of using blogs as an assessment tool. The focus group was recorded, professionally transcribed in full with responses anonymised at the point of transcription, and analysed using **thematic coding**. It is entirely feasible that my contact with the students (as CO) could have positively skewed the data collected, likewise, the self-selecting participants may represent only those who particularly enjoyed blogging or especially liked the course. **Retrospective use of the CES data and focus group method was approved by the School of GeoSciences Research Ethics and Integrity Committee.** Informed consent to take photographs (for use on Twitter, in conference papers and potential publications) was sought at the start of each course; all students gave their permission.

Hands on

SPSP focuses on raising students' awareness, and cultivating their understanding, of everyday sensory worlds and their variation across **different** historical and geographical contexts. In so doing, it acknowledges that sensory perception is as much a social, cultural and political practice as it is a physical or biological function (Howes, 2005). In turn, the course examines: the philosophical groundings of the scholarly study of the senses within geography and related disciplines aiming to sensitize the students to historical-cultural differences in understandings of the sensorium (Weeks 1-2); the senses as dictated by the Western sensorium (Weeks 3-7); sensory geographies 'in practice' (Week 8); and, the sensory dynamics of 'real world' scenarios such as noise pollution and climate change (Weeks 9-10) (Table 1).³ In Weeks 8-10 student-led sessions also allow space for explorations of intersensoriality, other sensory modalities, resonances, and dissonances.

[Table 1 about here]

Introducing what Lom (2012) describes as ‘pops’ of activity into lectures is a well-known way of confounding the architectural configuration of traditional lecture theatres, which prevents movement, inhibits discussion, and focuses attention on the lecturer as knowledge-provider. It can also help to manage waning student attention (Krakowka 2012). Certainly, asking my students to stroke the forearm of the person sitting beside them during the ‘Touching’ lecture **is stimulant enough to recover** lost focus (Biggs & Tang 2011); however, it provides more than just a cognitive jolt to the system. Touching, and being touched by, their peers (or refusing) creates a tangible hook which enables the students to connect with the course content in a way that is affective, immediate, and personally meaningful, and helps to embody the abstract theory being discussed (Fagan & Sturm 2015). As one student commented, “I appreciate[d] the tutorials which involved hands-on experience with the senses, this stimulated my understanding of the course content far beyond what the readings alone could have managed” (CES 2014-15). A moment of hesitation - as friends and relative strangers of differing genders and cultural backgrounds contemplate touching their peers⁴ - compels them to consider who *they* are willing to touch/be touched by, where, when and what the rules governing such behaviour might be. A flash of introspection as they register - through audible intakes of breath, exchanged glances, shifting positions, and nervous laughter - their peer’s response to the prospect of being touched by *them* likewise demonstrates that not only is touching a meaningful sensory activity, but also, that the meanings associated with touch are subjective, contextual, and governed by social norms (Lambert, 2011). Students have commented;

The course has been a fantastic eye-opener to the way in which the senses influence our everyday behaviours (CES, 2014-15).

[‘Most valuable’ was] the material changes in my life as the course broadened my understanding of how myself (sic) and the people around me function (CES, 2018-19).

As such, the activity is crucial in helping the students to understand that the “sensory order [...] is not just something one sees or hears about; it is something one *lives*” (Howes, 2005, p.3, original emphasis).

[Figure 1 about here]

[Figure 2 about here]

Other in-class activities include different kinds of taste testing (Figure 1), food consumption, touch testing (Figure 2), optical illusions, and smell experiments. All involve some form of interaction between the students, either by design (e.g. an instruction to discuss their responses) or as a consequence (e.g. eye contact, body language, vocal expressions, spontaneous discussion), coercing them into considering not just their own embodied perceptions but also how responses within the group might correspond or vary (Glass, 2014). And all are designed to be playful, to prioritise the non-cognitive aspects of experience (Woodyer, 2012). Discussing the importance of play Tara Woodyer (ibid, p.321) notes that, when playing, one becomes more open to the world, there is a “disappearance of time as the player becomes ‘lost in the moment’ and emerges as part of, or strongly identifies with something beyond, yet also including oneself”. She continues, “players experience a shared intimacy with others [...] allowing energy to flow through them. They develop a felt reciprocal understanding that enables them to ‘go with the flow’” (ibid, p.321). In SPSP play helps to create a collective feeling of exploration and endeavour, the activities encourage the

students to experiment together and foster new understandings in a low-stakes environment, and it is possible to see them becoming absorbed and focused as the activities excite their curiosity. One student said that they really valued the “highly collaborative and social” (CES, 2018-19) atmosphere in class. Whilst others noted that the “tasks were very engaging and fun” (CES, 2015-16) and that the activities made them “engaged and intrigued” (CES, 2015-16) and “excited to turn up each week” (CES, 2014-15).

We tend to pretend that pleasure is not particularly significant in terms of what happens in the classroom (Lambert, 2011), but evidence suggests that students "are much more likely to remember what they've been taught if they've had fun learning it" (Simmons, 2016, unpaginated). Humour precipitates modes of thinking that are investigative and open to trial and error; it contributes to enjoyment, interest, motivation, instils creativity and reduces tension and anxiety (Weaver & Cotrell, 1987). Commenting on how they felt after class one student commented, “I now have a better appreciation for the senses and their role in diversified knowledge acquisition and transmission. I noticed I left every class smiling, which is always a bonus” (CES, 2018-19). Whilst another hinted that the ludic nature of, and positive feelings derived from, the in-class activities (Thornbush, 2014) had been crucial to their learning; “I particularly enjoyed the activities we had in the tutorials. This made learning easier and more fun” (CES, 2014-15). Undoubtedly, the students’ responses will be influenced by their positionality (e.g. life experiences, beyond-classroom knowledge, interests). As one student apologetically stated, “[r]eally did not enjoy the drawing tutorial [...] it was clear Nina wanted to give us various ways to learn which is great and appreciated, just not my cup of tea” (CES, 2015-16). Likewise, one cannot expect to transform students’ embedded positionality through a single activity (Golubchikov, 2015); however, previous

responses demonstrate that these hands-on, playful and experimental activities are an important way of embodying the material being taught in class.

Fieldtrips have long been an essential component of geography undergraduate education (Fagan & Sturm, 2015; Evans, 2016). Fieldtrips in ‘real-world’ settings and situations provide students with opportunities to contextualise, internalise, and re-examine often rather abstract theory taught in lectures (Herrick, 2010). They afford opportunities to acquire practical experience of research methods (Fuller, 2012) and can spark curiosity (Phillips, 2015). Geography undergraduate fieldtrips are most commonly associated with extended periods (\geq a week) immersed in remote, unfamiliar, and/or extraordinary landscapes (Hovorka & Wolf, 2009; Herrick, 2010). In SPSP, however, I posit that legitimate and valuable fieldwork can also (and as feminist scholars have long argued, should) take place in the mundane, familiar everyday worlds in which we live (Hovorka & Wolf, 2009). To this end, I take the students on a number of short-duration (c.50 minutes) fieldtrips in class time. These include site visits (e.g. to an anechoic chamber, art installations, underground vaults, a brewery and gin distillery) and experiments with sensory methods (e.g. smell and sound walking, attentive listening, field sketching). Students are also allocated optional tasks at the end of Lectures 2-6 which encourage them to undertake their own small-scale field investigations.⁵ These trips challenge the assumption that learning only takes place in the teacher-dominated classroom and demonstrate that opportunities for learning can be found everywhere (Biggs & Tang, 2011). In this way the course goes beyond the idea of learning as embodied, to understand it as also ‘emplaced’ (Fors, Bäckström & Pink, 2013; Howes, 2005). Likewise, it rejects the caricature (derided by Michel Serres in *Les Cinq Sens*) of academics as ‘de-sensualised robots’, shackled to their desks and concerned only with what their eyes can see (Howes, 2005; Serres, [1985]2008).

The sensory methods sessions also acknowledge that the students' research training may not have provided the skills they need to record, analyse and communicate the more-than-visual, subjective, intangible aspects of experience (Last 2012; Phillips 2015). By experimenting with methods and challenging the students to be more creative and adventurous in their approach the aim is to make them more attuned to the sensory detail of life and, in turn, more acutely aware of themselves in relation to others and to the world (Ryan 2012). Many of the students are just grateful for the opportunity to get away from their desks;

It was so nice to learn outside away from the normality of university life. It was a joy to remember that education can come in different forms (CES, 2015-16).

I really enjoyed the practical sessions which provided an opportunity to get out of the classroom (CES, 2014-15).

With one student saying they relished the opportunity to put "what [they] were taught into practice" (CES, 2015-16). Practices of drawing and painting, for example, are currently experiencing renewed attention in cultural geography (Wylie & Webster, 2019), but for many of the students, the field-sketching (once a core skill of the undergraduate geographer) exercise (Figure 3) is the first time they have been asked to draw since high-school. During the exercise students are prompted to reflect on field-sketching as a skill and what might "be gained in the doing and in the course of learning to do", as well as the "process of image-making [...] as a means of producing geographical knowledge" (Hawkins, 2015, p.249 and p.251). Each task (e.g. 'draw what you hear', 'draw what you feel', or 'draw movement') is designed to sensitize them to their individual perceptions, affective atmospheres and external

agencies, to draw attention to things they might usually miss, to see differently, and to become more intimate with their surroundings (Hawkins, 2015; Wylie & Webster, 2019). In other words, to be emplaced, to “reposition [themselves] in relation to the sensuous materiality of the world” (Howes, 2005, p.7). Whilst the techniques (e.g. blind contour drawing - drawing without looking down at the paper, continuous line drawing) challenge them to simply ‘have a go’ (Evans, 2016) and embrace possible failure (Kullman, 2013; Wylie & Webster, 2019). The overall message being that curiosity, playful experimentation, endeavour, and openness, may lead them to ‘real discoveries’ (Phillips 2015).

[Figure 3 about here]

The in-class activities and fieldtrips do not just invite the students to confront aspects of their everyday sensory interactions with others, in and beyond the academy (Askins, 2008), that they may have taken for granted, ignored, or given no critical thought (Fagan & Sturm, 2015). They also force them to confront their assumptions about the discipline and learning. For example, one student found that SPSP challenged their understanding of what human geography might legitimately include; “Some of the activities such as the anechoic chamber maybe strayed away from human geography ever so slightly, however this is a minor qualm in an otherwise very enjoyable course” (CES, 2014-15). Another found it difficult to reconcile the pedagogical approach with their perceived expectations of what a university education should entail; “[s]ome of the [learning activities] felt a little pointless, and I feel that time may have been better spent discussing literature etc., which we could then apply to our own ideas” (CES, 2017-18). While another was dissatisfied with having to participate in activities they felt were purposeless (Woodyer, 2012); “[d]id seem a bit random sometimes. The hearing walk did seem like we were just helping the guy out with his research, didn't massively

benefit from it. Was a bit of a cringey geography thing to do” (CES, 2015-16). Seidel and Tanner (2013) note that student resistance is often hard to detect *in situ* because it is most often passively than actively enacted; however, it is not uncommon for students more used to teacher-centred pedagogy to resist a shift to student-centred pedagogy (Hains & Smith, 2012). For some, this is because it requires them to take personal responsibility for their learning (ibid). As one student stated; “students in this uni are used to being just passive recipients, so it might take some time before people realise that teaching doesn't have to go just one way, but it can and should be interactive” (CES, 2016-17). For others, particularly those who felt the time was wasted, grades and ease of completion, rather than learning if and of itself, would appear to have been the primary motivating incentives (Seidel & Tanner, 2013).

Minds on

Experiential learning advocates argue that assessments should require students to actively transform their knowledge not simply repeat what they have been told (Anderson, 2013). SPSP is summatively assessed by an independently-written six-post 3,000-word blog (60%) and a 2000-word essay (40%).⁶ Anticipating student anxiety about a largely unfamiliar assessment type and to encourage risk-taking, the blog content is kept private. In contrast, the essay is a social learning exercise (Biggs & Tang, 2013). Students can choose from three essay types (standard essay, applied analysis, or mini-ethnography) on a topic of their choice. In Week 10 they submit a 500-word plan which is ‘workshopped’ in Week 11; first, in small groups (wherein each student presents an elevator-pitch followed by a Q&A session), then by the whole class (wherein each student tours their peers’ plans writing constructive comments as appropriate). I also give each student individual feedback. We tend to neglect the emotional and affective advantages of thinking in groups (Berg & Seeber, 2016), but this type of approach “challenges the framing of the student as, only awaiting instruction and

disempowered” (Askins, 2008, p.505). They are encouraged to take their own and their peers’ knowledge more seriously, to play around with ideas, to make their own judgements, “to believe that they have something to learn from each other” and not to see me as the only source of authority (ibid, p.505). The exercise also reinforces the idea that knowledge is not created in a vacuum and, anecdotally, helps put students at ease by giving them an insight into others’ intentions.

Coulson and Harvey (2013, p.403) warn that, for experiential learning to be successful, “learners need to take an active role in developing and applying their reflective skills” and that this requires “a capacity for agency that may not be well developed in all learners”. Certainly, the blog poses technical and writing challenges for which many of the students, at least initially, feel they are ill-equipped (Summerby-Murray, 2010). Although assessed blogs have multiple benefits (Morris, Christie & Barber, 2019), it is well known that they can increase student anxiety if they already find writing difficult (Smith, 2010; Pursel & Xie, 2014), and that students write more conservatively and/or self-censor if they fear negative judgement (Kidwell, Northcott & Paterson, 2012; Hansen, 2015) or struggle to express their emotions (Golubchikov, 2015). In SPSP I use ‘scaffolding’ (Coulson & Harvey, 2013) in order to develop the students’ capacity for reflection and boost their confidence and expectations of success (Biggs & Tang, 2011). I am careful to ‘frame’ my pedagogical choices and dispel fears of failure (ibid; Seidel & Tanner, 2013) reassuring the students that everyone is creative in their own way (Scoffham, 2013). Whilst not overly prescriptive, the assessment guidance is detailed and in a range of formats (e.g. a ‘checklist’ in the Course Handbook, blog-specific Grade Related Marking Criteria, a FAQ-sheet, a technical document, sample blogs from previous years). I provide links to academic geographers’ blogs, the work of sensory theorists/artists, and senses-related websites. I also hold fortnightly blog ‘surgeries’

where students can voice individual concerns. The key message is that the blogs should reflect individual intellectual curiosity and enthusiasm but are not a 'free for all' (Cook, 2000).

Students write a practice post in response to a group activity in Week 1 (commonly a visit to an art installation, in 2018-19 a city-centre silent disco tour) on which I provide detailed individual comment. Providing early and detailed formative feed-back in this way helps to create a climate where students feel free to experiment, be spirited in their choice of subject matter, and make mistakes (Biggs & Tang, 2011)

I use blogs in SPSP because they can empower and motivate students to think independently and assume responsibility for their learning (Dunleavy, 2015), they encourage reflection (Pursel & Xie, 2014), and can bring learning 'to life' by encouraging students to make cognitive and emotional connections between the course and the wider world (Smith, 2010), and between new and previous knowledge (Haines & Smith, 2010). Blog writing is also effective because it offers an 'experiential immediacy'; the first-person narrative and integration of multimedia resources allowing for a more subjective, sensual, emotive, and expressive engagement with the subject (Last, 2012; Glass, 2014). I still expect the students to demonstrate an awareness and understanding of the relevant theoretical and methodological literature, but also "to communicate something less formulaic and conventional: creativity, curiosity, intense experience, discovery" (Phillips, 2015, p.626). For many students the blogs offer a welcome respite from the norm;

Really enjoyed writing blogs instead of the usual boring assessments. Gives more creative students the chance to shine! Do not believe in essays all the time as ways to assess [...] was a refreshing way to think about a course and shows that the geography department need to branch out from standard assessments (CES, 2015-16).

The pictures and the font and colour and stuff [...] I really enjoyed that [...] having your own personality and individuality [...] essays are standardised font and layout and everything, [...] for me university assessments feel like they just want everyone to be the same. [Blogs allow] you a different way of expressing thoughts and your perspective and stuff (R4, PTAS).

They feel a sense of ownership and control over their work (Hains & Smith, 2012), but perhaps most importantly they feel that they can express *themselves*;

[They] allow people's personality to come through more, [...] there's a degree of flexibility with how you do them, and obviously what you can do it on as well. And I just think that's encouraging people to think outside the box and be a bit more unique and individual (R4, PTAS).

It was good to put in your personal reflections, whereas essays don't tend to do that so much. So that was fun and exciting, and it gets you to engage with the course in that personal level (R1, PTAS FG).

Blogs focus on the 'person' of the student (Blackie et al, 2010), each individual is supported in following their own interests and encouraged to think about how their everyday lives and experiences connect with the course material.

Following Palmer (1998 cited in Summerby-Murray, 2010, p.239), blog writing enables the students to "situate their little stories within the big stories" of geography. Personal

experience becomes their ‘inner teacher’ (Summerby-Murray, 2010) as they begin to construct a ‘reciprocal feedback loop’ between academic ideas and their own experiences (Anderson, 2013). Energised by the in-class learning experience, in the blogs, the students begin to enact ‘performances of understanding’ (Biggs & Tang 2011) wherein they are not just consumers of knowledge but are actively involved in putting knowledge to work. As one student stated;

I think it's one of the first times I've felt fully engaged with a course, like thought. [...] Like I leave and I talked about it with people. [...] I've literally never done that. Even if I've enjoyed a course, I've never fully felt...I don't know, like it's impacted the way I think fully. I think the blogs helped with that (R3, PTAS).

In the blog, the students are able to exercise their knowledge outside the confines of academic convention (Hains & Smith, 2012) or, as Woodyer (2012) would say, in ‘non-playing’ times and spaces. Over the semester it is possible to see a transition in the students’ confidence, they become less hesitant, increasingly open, and more explorative with regards to what constitutes an educational experience (Haines & Smith, 2010). As a result the blog post themes are singular and varied covering, to date, playing music, practicing body-balance, home cooking, kite-surfing, cross-country running, uninvited touch on the dancefloor, dining in the dark experiments and wild swimming; memorably, one student recorded urban sounds and then created his own dance track which he then uploaded to his post on listening.

Students are often surprised by their own enthusiasm. As one student commented;

I almost looked forward to doing it. I mean I found it hard to think of a topic, because you can do anything. So that's almost overwhelming in thinking what am I actually going to do then? But once you do get it I think I really liked it. It wasn't... like with an essay I really have to motivate myself to sit down and think of every single sentence (R2, PTAS).

Others suggest that the course has transformed not just their approach to learning; “[i]t has provided a new way of approaching all geographical tasks, and has made me appreciate the nuances of the everyday lived experience in understanding geographical notions” (CES, 2017-18). But also their everyday understanding and behaviour;

The course taught me a new way to look at the world which I will take with me for the rest of my life (CES, 2015-16).

I have also been much more vigilant in daily life regarding my senses. It has changed the way I undergo daily activities, for example, I use my earphones less in public and I have went (sic) on walks without a certain route planned. I am more aware of taken for granted mundane processes now (CES, 2018-19).

Whether the students themselves feel they have become ‘more successful’ learners over the duration of the course is difficult to determine and will inevitably, because of the way in which degrees are awarded, depend on the final grade they receive. Collectively, however, these responses suggest that a fundamental shift has taken place in the students’ approach to their studies and everyday life which could potentially have long-lasting consequences and, as such, the approach can be deemed ‘successful’.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper highlights the powerful role that sensorially engaged pedagogy can play in transforming the awareness and understanding of geography undergraduate students in three different ways. First, it demonstrates how learning activities designed to foster multi-sensory engagement with course content (**whether this relates specifically to the senses or not**) can work to assist students in understanding that knowledge is embodied, emplaced, and constructed by the individual. In SPSP, activities inside and outside the classroom provide tangible (and frequently visceral) reference points which enable the students to connect with course content, and witness the reactions of their peers, in a way that makes it both personally meaningful and socially relevant. As such, it challenges not only the ‘sensorial poverty’ of contemporary theory - as defined by Serres (Howes 2005) - but also traditional undergraduate teaching (and concomitant assessment) practices.

Second, it exemplifies the critical potential of play in the undergraduate curriculum not just “as a form of coming to consciousness and a way to be otherwise” (Woodyer 2012: 322), but also, in the creation of a supportive and less-pressurised learning environment that engages and motivates students without losing sight of the curriculum concepts (Young 2002). Despite (perhaps inevitable) resistance on the part of some students, in SPSP the novel nature of the learning activities engenders amusement, fascination, and enthusiasm demonstrating that pleasure and fun need not be antithetical to the learning process. Sharing these experiences also serves to embolden individual students to embrace potential failure and to value unsuccessful experiments as positive learning experiences (Kullman, 2013; Wylie and Webster, 2019). This results in a desire amongst the students to engage beyond the ‘bare

minimum' and an increased capacity for resilience which enables them to develop and flourish intellectually rather than merely reproduce 'knowledge and technique' (Kullman 2013).

Third, it shows that emotional engagement through personal connection is critical to fostering students' cognitive engagement and, in turn, their ability to enact performances of understanding in assessments (and beyond, in self-initiated conversations with non-course members). In SPSP, the learning environment forces (whether they realise it or not at the time) the students to consider their 'self-image' as learners (Blackie et al 2010), their role in the learning process, and the process of knowledge exchange. As they gain confidence they begin to understand themselves as repositories, and potential communicators, of knowledge. They are also more willing and able to draw upon their own experiences, their 'little stories', as a means of entry into what might previously have been dismissed as abstract theory. Over the course of the semester one witnesses a transformation; the students become more engaged, curious and critical, they begin to take risks challenging any previous assumptions they might have had regarding the remit of human geography, and bringing an altogether more emotionally involved, personally meaningful, 'human' dimension to their work.

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Table 1 Course outline

Week	Lecture (two hours)	Tutorial (one hour)	Assessment
1	Introduction to the course	Sensory experience	
2	<i>Perfect Sense</i> (film)		<i>Practice blog post (formative)</i>
3	Touching	Touch in the museum	<i>Blog post 1 – touching</i>
4	Smelling	Smell workshop	<i>Blog post 2 – smelling</i>
5	Tasting	Brewery and distillery visit	<i>Blog post 3 – tasting</i>
6	Seeing	A visit to the vaults	<i>Blog post 4 – seeing</i>
7	Hearing	Searching for silence	<i>Blog post 5 – hearing</i>
8	i) Doing sensory geographies ii) Synaesthesia (student-led, Group 1)		<i>Blog post 6 – group topic</i>
9	i) Sensing the city ii) Kinaesthesia (student-led, Group 2)		<i>Complete blog deadline (summative)</i>
10	i) Environmental sensitivity ii) Attunement (student-led, Group 3)		<i>Essay plan (formative)</i>
11	Assessed essay workshop		<i>Essay deadline in four weeks (summative)</i>



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

Figure captions

Figure 1 Using food dye on the tongue to count papillae.

Figure 2 Home-made touch test kit including paper-clip callipers, pens, wooden spoons, and 'rubber hand'.

Figure 3 Field sketching – 'draw what you hear'.

¹ Vannini et al (2012: 67) define sensory intelligence as 'a type of intelligence that involves all our senses and the reflexive cultivation of our sensations. Sensory intelligence is the ability to understand one's and others' sensations. It is the skilled use of sensibility to approach life situations. It is the ability to utilize one's senses as skills to manipulate and adapt to one's environment. It is the combined emotional, visceral, and cognitive ability to engage in somatic work'.

² At least in part; it should be noted that my approach to teaching and learning has been heavily influenced by my experience as an undergraduate student on the 'Histories and Cultures of the Transatlantic' course outlined in Cook (2000).

³ Two lectures in Weeks 3-7 are always delivered by guest lecturers. These have included Kate McLean (smell), Jonathan Prior (hearing), George Jaramillo (seeing), Michael Gallagher (hearing), Sophia Lycouris (kinaesthesia), and Ericka Duffy (smell). The order of the themes in Weeks 3-7 is subject to change according to speaker/venue availability.

⁴ **At the start of the course the students are told that they should participate in class activities only when they feel comfortable doing so; should they prefer simply to observe at certain points no comment will be made. Although I accept that the arm stroking activity may be an unwelcome emotional trigger for some students, I feel that strategic**

use of interpersonal touch in this instance provides a powerful embodied learning experience, far more so than is I asked the students to merely contemplate touching the person next to them. To date, some have opted not to participate (either as toucher, touched, or both); however, it is usually the case that I have to instruct them to stop stroking each other after several minutes when the activity transitions from teachable moment into giddiness at the novelty of the act. Several students have gone on to discuss unsolicited and solicited interpersonal touch in their assessed blog posts; again, students are told at the start of the course that I have a duty of care for their safety and/or well-being and that if they discuss anything that concerns me in their blog I will raise it with the Geography Student Support Coordinator.

⁵ Inspiration for these are drawn from The Geography Collective (2010), Smith (2008, 2016), and various online resources for primary and secondary school teachers.

⁶ In 2017-18 the assessment weightings were flipped in response to consistent student feedback. Previously, students submitted a 2000-word five-post blog (40%) and a 3000-word essay (60%).